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ABSTRACT

This newsletter article addresses the increasing role of telecommunications and its effect on American Indian institutions. Advocates believe that telecommunications could make rural Indian reservations more viable places to live, work, educate children, and treat illnesses. Additionally, new technology could revolutionize reservation economies. However, before Indian communities leap onto the "information superhighway," they must be willing to take action to determine how the information system is designed and regulated. American Indian Telecommunications and Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) have attempted to educate Indian communities concerning the urgency and necessity of becoming a part of the telecommunications movement. American Indian Telecommunications was created to promote Indian use of computers and telecommunications in a culturally appropriate manner. AIO raised money and started INDIANnet, which provides subscribers with free job announcements, information from the Federal Register and several federal agencies, research services, and free access to Internet. Despite such growing involvement, Indian people must do much more at the national and local level with regard to the national telecommunications agenda. To protect their sovereign rights, tribal institutions must ensure the nation's telecommunications policies reflect various Indian concerns including privacy of data, cost sharing, safeguarding traditional tribal beliefs and values, and encouraging Indian people to become producers of media as well as consumers. (LP)

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TELECOMMUNICATIONS: WHERE THE RED ROAD MEETS THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

by: Marjane Ambler

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BUSINESS ALERT

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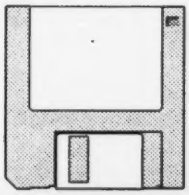
Telecommunications: where the red road meets the information superhighway



BY MARJANE AMBLER

The day Vice President Al Gore addressed the nation about the administration's plans for an "Information Superhighway," George Baldwin went to his computer keyboard and sent Gore's speech out to a list of INDIANnet subscribers. One of them tapped out a response: "What does that have to do with tribal sovereignty?"

Everything, according to Baldwin and other advocates of aggressive Indian involvement in telecommunications. According to Indian telecommunication experts who gathered in Denver recently for a strategy session, tribal leaders need to recognize telecommunications issues as cultural war and assign resources accordingly.

Vice President Gore and others use the term "information superhighway" because of the speed with which visual images, sound, and data can travel. But this highway doesn't depend upon concrete and asphalt. Instead, distant people reach out to one another using wires, cables, antennas, satellites and fiber optics.

The advocates recognize the potential risks involved for anyone — perhaps especially Indian institutions — jumping into the high speed freeway of the information age: cost for equipment that might soon be obsolete, loss of privacy, and sense of culture shock. The cost advantages of telecommunication result from allowing people to communicate while remaining separate from one another in distant classrooms, hospitals, or offices instead of bringing them together.

Indian Country's telecommunication advocates believe the advantages of participating far outweigh the problems — if Indian people help determine how the information system is designed and regulated. A Native-friendly telecommunication system could break reservations out of their crippling

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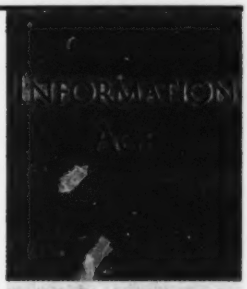

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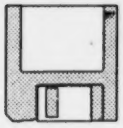

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isolation, help Indian students excel in a bicultural world and keep Indian cultures and languages alive. Regardless of whether Indian people approve of the nation's plans for the superhighway of the Information Age, the United States will proceed. Thus Indians either will travel that highway or they will be "techno-peasants" left in the dust at the roadside.

Dr. George Baldwin, an Osage-Kaw, serves as one of the handful of Indian pathfinders in the telecommunications fast lane. The president of American Indian Telecommunications says, "In an economy based on the creation, distribution, and consumption of information, American Indians are becoming an electronically colonialized people — information poor, techno-peasants."

Reservations must be on the information highway to protect their economies, schools, colleges, and medical services, says Randy Ross, vice president of American Indian Telecommunications. "When the interstate highway system was built, access for many reservations didn't happen. If Indians aren't at the table this time around, we will lose again."

LaDonna Harris, Comanche, does not pretend to be an authority on the technology. But because she recognizes its political urgency, her organization, Americans for Indian Opportunity, has taken a lead role. "I don't want to be an expert, but now it is the future. We better get on top of it and decide how we can manage it to make sure it doesn't wipe out the rest of our culture," Harris says.

Keeping Reservations Alive

Why the urgency? What specific advantages does the new telecommunications technology offer to Indian people now and in the future? Reading or watching popular news accounts, one might wonder. They emphasize entertainment — hundreds of movies accessible in one's living room — and wealth to be made by an elite few corporate investors. The news accounts tout digitalized information for liberating urban and corporate refugees.

While Indian people will also benefit from the entertainment value of the new technologies, Indian opinion leaders on the telecommunications front see much more significant benefits for Indian people. Satellite communications could make rural reservations more viable places to live, work, educate children, and treat illnesses. Madonna Peltier Yawakie, Turtle Mountain Chippewa, directs the Tribal Technologies Initiative for US WEST Communications, a Baby Bell that serves 50 reservations in 14 states. Yawakie says that telemedicine exemplifies one of the most valuable new uses for telephone lines. Through X-ray imaging, for example, a doctor on the reservation could put an X-ray on the screen and send the image to a

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left out once again," says Helen Sanders, Vice-Chair of the Indian Land Working Group, formed three years ago to deal with the problems of fractionated ownership on Indian reservations. "We are talking about individuals and the property which they own, and which they should control, and they have been left out of the process altogether."

Ms. Sanders hopes to work with the Chehalis Tribe in Washington on a demonstration project which would assist individual Indian land owners in exchanging their interests according to family ownership patterns. She's hoping the BIA will be cooperative. "Although the process of land exchanges may appear complex, it can be done. It's a matter of having the data, the maps and the time, so that people know what they have, what they want to exchange, and what they will be getting."

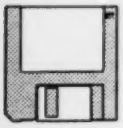
A land owner herself, Helen Sanders knows the value of knowing and using land resources. She has successfully logged and managed her own interests on the Quinault Reservation.

For a copy of the heirship report call or write Larry Morrin at 202/208-7737, Department of Interior — Bureau of Indian Affairs Realty Division, 18 & C St., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20245.

To join with the Indian Land Working Group in responding to the Task Force Report, contact Theresa Carmody, First Nations Development Institute Land Specialist, at 505-666-2140; or write her at P.O. Box 128, Wagon Mound, N.M. 87752.

Theresa Carmody, a member of the Seneca Tribe, is a policy consultant for FNDI.

INFORMATION AGE



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specialist in a distant city. Data from other diagnostic equipment could be transmitted similarly, often saving the patients long, expensive trips.

If they don't participate fully in the Information Age, reservations will fall even farther behind, warns Howard Valandra, a Lakota businessman. Because of modern, compact computers and data transmission technology, Valandra can headquarter his $2 million a year business in the small, remote reservation town of Rosebud, S.D. He sells computers, software, and data, such as Geographic Information Systems. With the stroke of a key, he can tie into his suppliers' data base and place orders. Elsewhere, Navajos use electronic mail to market crafts to 40 countries.

Valandra believes the new technology could revolutionize reservation economies and save tribal governments hundreds of thousands of dollars just on travel. "We're using 1950s and 1960s mentality of networking when we could be teleconferencing," he says, referring to utilizing video cameras to link people meeting in different places.

Ojibwa and Pueblo elders demonstrated the potential during a tele-conference last October sponsored by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the national organization of tribal colleges. The Ojibwa gathered in Menomonie, Wis., to discuss the cultural ramifications of telecommunication with the Southwestern representatives, who were in Albuquerque, N.M. Viewers from tribal colleges across the nation called in to ask questions.

While pointing out the risk of exposing confidential cultural matters, the panelists suggested various ways that video technology could help them save their languages and culture. James Hena, Tesuque Pueblo, said, "We will keep mum about spiritual and religious aspects. But it can be used to inform the general Indian public about issues in Congress." Frank Barber, Ojibwa, said, "Our children seem to believe only what they see on TV. If Uncle Bill (tribal elder Bill Sutton) is on TV, maybe it will be more meaningful to them."

Before leaping on to the information superhighway, Indian experts say tribes must look both ways and proceed with caution — and with a plan. Most importantly, Baldwin emphasizes, Indian people must be drivers — not passive consumers of media. Uncle Bill must appear on TV, and Indian producers must get his message out on the airwaves.

Planning Strategy

Americans for Indian Opportunity started calling meetings to discuss telecommunications five years ago. "People were not ready then," says LaDonna Harris. With help from the National Science Foundation, AIO brought Indian people to Denver last fall for a telecommunications forum. By then, the level of awareness had begun to rise. Various Indian groups — including tribal colleges, Indian artists, and Indian radio producers — and individuals had started taking active roles in the information revolution. On various fronts, they are organizing and raising money for satellite and fiber optic hookups. While uninformed outsiders might find it incongruous to link indigenous people with high technology, the experts point to broad computer literacy in tribal government offices and reservation classrooms, with hundreds of subscribers in various Indian computer networks.

Computer literacy, however, is not the same as tele-literacy — the ability to send data, voice, or video. Three Indian telecommunications professionals (Baldwin, Dr. James May, and Randy Ross) created American Indian Telecommunications to promote Indian use of computers and telecommunications in a culturally appropriate manner. AIO also raised money and started INDIANnet, which will provide subscribers with free job announcements and information from the *Federal Register*, several federal agencies, and research services. Baldwin, the project director, says INDIANnet will also provide free access to Indian people to Internet, the international service funded by the National Science Foundation which is now accessible primarily at colleges and universities.

Indian people are beginning to be heard, reminding the nation's government and business leaders that Indian people must be considered when setting telecommunication policy. For example, Indian employees at US WEST Communications convinced their corporation to launch a study to explore selling more equipment and data lines on reservations. Two Indian people, LaDonna Harris and Rodger Boyd of the Navajo Division of Economic Development, were invited to testify at a public hearing Dec. 16 in Albuquerque by the

National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

Tribal colleges won a strong endorsement from the head of the agency, Assistant Secretary for Communications Larry Irving, when he testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs last July. Irving referred to the agency's past assistance for Native American public radio stations across the country, saying NTIA funds had been used to establish several of the stations. He commended the American Indian Higher Education Consortium Telecommunication Project, which received substantial funding through his agency.

The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs also has taken a strong stance on the need for Indian people to be included on the ground floor of telecommunications planning. The committee proposed the $250,000 NTIC planning grant for the tribal college consortium as a model for Indian Country. The resulting study (published in April 1993) analyzed how the 29 tribal colleges could utilize satellite communications to interconnect with each other and with others who offer distance learning. The colleges also studied using the technology for in-service training and administrative networking. The second phase of the study is now underway. (The AIHEC telecommunications project will be discussed in the next issue of *Business Alert*.)

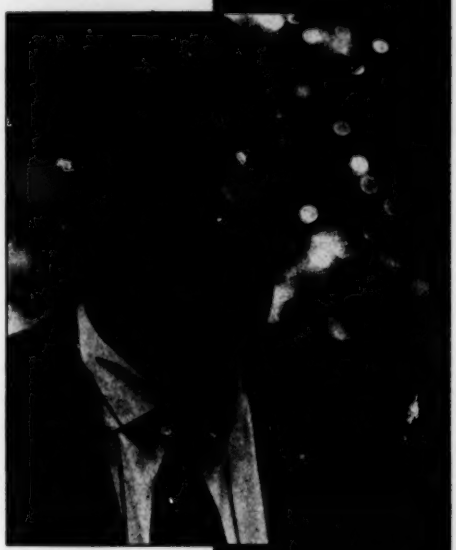
Despite such growing involvement, the experts agree that Indian people must do much more at the national and the local level. Tribal organizations have not put telecommunications on their national agenda. Planners have neglected telecommunications, leaving out cables when building hospitals and classroom computer labs. "Indian telecommunication experts are not at the table where the decisions are being made," according to Randy Ross.

Electronic Colonialism

If they are not at the table, he fears that history will repeat itself. In the past, Indian people as a group have benefited less and been hurt more by telecommunication than other people in this country. Sometimes they have not received the basic telephone service that others take for granted. Rodger Boyd told the NTIA in December that two-thirds of Navajo homes do not have telephone service; half of those homes cannot get phone service, and the other half cannot afford it. Twenty-three percent of Indian homes nationwide don't have phones compared with 5 percent of the general population, according to the 1990 U.S. Census.

From the telegraph on, advanced media have been weapons of cultural assault. Indigenous people worldwide have watched their cultures crumble when televisions entered their communities, introducing foreign values.

Indian people don't want the past to predict the future in either exploitation or access. The Clinton Administration recognizes that without intervention, the information highway may not serve everyone: the Dec. 16 hearing's purpose was to explore ways that the new National Information Infrastructure could provide universal service. Nevertheless, the administration plans to continue relying upon private enterprise to construct the information infrastructure. If telecommunications companies focus only upon high volume areas, rural reservations may be neglected.



Setting Tribal Policies

The Indian pathfinders say Indian people must set telecommunications high on their agenda. To protect their sovereign rights, tribal institutions must seriously consider policy issues and make sure the nation's telecommunication policies reflect various Indian concerns. And they must share their thoughts using INDIANnet or even such old standbys as the post office and telephone. For example:

Privacy. Howard Valandra says, "Tribes have vast amounts of data that state and federal governments and private companies would like to have their fingers on concerning lawsuit strategies, casino revenues, and enrollment." He says tribes must protect the privacy of their data if they plan to transmit it.

Tribal codes. Randy Ross notes, "Indian nations need to assess communication law and policy and begin writing their own codes, which may mirror the federal but which may cover cultural matters, too."

Cost sharing. Tribes should insist that industry

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FUNDING *Sources*

✔ The 10th annual National Symposium on Child Sexual Abuse will take place Feb. 22 through 26 in Huntsville, Ala.

For information, contact the National Children's Advocacy Center at 202/533-6129.

✔ Two publications are available for the specific use of American Indians and Alaska Natives seeking financial assistance for education.

"The American Indian/Alaska Native Higher Education Funding Guide" is available for $21.90 from Arrowstar Publishing, 10134 University Park Station, Denver, CO 802100134, ISBN# 0-935151-24-9.

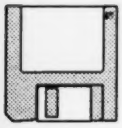
A 50-page booklet, "Sources of Financial Aid Available to American Indian Students," can be obtained from Indian Resource Development, New Mexico State University, Box 30001, Dept. 3IRD, Las Cruces, NM 88003, 505/646-1347.

✔ American Indians who have been accepted into masters of business programs at one of 10 universities are eligible for merit-based fellowships designed to promote American Indian entry into management positions in business. The 10 universities in the newly formed consortium are: Indiana University, University of Michigan, New York University, University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill, University of Rochester, University of Southern California, University of Texas/Austin, University of Virginia, Washington University in St. Louis, and the University of Wisconsin/Madison.

For information contact: Consortium For Graduate Study in Management, Washington University, Attention: Wallace L. Jones, 12855 North Outer Drive #40, Suite 100, St. Louis, MO 63141-8635, or call 314/935-5614.

✔ The Communications Consortium Media Center is offering two 1994 fellowships to students with graduate or undergraduate degrees, or comparable experience, in public relations, communications, journalism or a related field. Applications for Fall 1994 fellowships must be received no later than March 31. Candidates must be prepared to begin the fellows program in October 1994. Women and people of color are encouraged to apply.

For information contact the Communications Consortium Media Center, 1333 H Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20005.



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include information communications in business contracts, according to Dr. James May, a member of the United Keetoowah Band. Whenever new roads or buildings are being constructed, adds Madonna Yawakie of US WEST, tribes should contact their local telecommunication companies about the possibility of upgrading telephone lines at the same time, thus dramatically lowering costs.

Social engineering. May and Baldwin say the technology should be "Native friendly" and should reinforce traditional tribal beliefs and values. For example, computers can be used to teach Native languages.

Training and education. Peggy Berryhill of Indigenous Voices, a radio magazine program, says Indian people must become producers not just consumers of telecommunications. Deciding not to make movies didn't stop movies from being made about Indians. The content will not improve until Indians become writers, producers, directors, and actors, she said.

Ann Fallis said that the Indian telecommunication experts aim not to be "gurus" but to broaden the expertise and break down the elitist barriers. Relying upon traditions of respect and cooperation, they are providing support and encouragement to increase the numbers of Indian people on-line.

Working together they dream of transforming telecommunication into a tool of Indian people. Ross says, "We can make any item or concept, however Eurocentric it may initially be, into something distinctly Indian."

Marjane Ambler is a freelance writer and editor in Mancos, Colo., and a frequent contributor to Business Alert.